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MILK RIVER FARMS

"Readjustment of Population to Land Resources in Northern Montana"

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Soil Conservation Service.)

That portion of northern Montana lying between the Missouri River and the Canadian line, comprising Blaine, Phillips, and Valley Counties and including an area over twice the size of Connecticut, has become a new frontier. These counties, embracing the Milk River land-use adjustment project of the Soil Conservation Service and the Milk River farms project of the Farm Security Administration, have become the proving ground of a program of adjustment of people to land resources.

Crossing the Missouri from the crowded ranges of central Montana, early cattlemen found an almost unlimited range. Range grass grew knee high on the benchlands. Beaver-dammed creeks and spring coulees spilled their overflow to flood-irrigated rich bottoms where even in the winter stock could "rustle" for feed. The rough badland areas provided shelter and early spring feed, with water available during the long dry season.

Charley Russell, who knew every foot of the country and whose oils and watercolors have captured the very spirit of those first frontier days, wrote in a letter to a friend, "It's all grass upside down now."

The backwash of a financial panic, the empire-building plans of transcontinental railways, and the urge of a new generation to find new lands and new opportunities resulted in this vast public domain being thrown open to homesteading. It is stated that President Theodore Roosevelt recommended that a strip of public domain land a township wide on each side of the Milk River irrigation project be reserved from homesteading as grazing land to supplement the income of the irrigated valley. This sound land-use plan was never adopted because the pressure groups, who believed that a family should make a good living on any 320 acres of dry land, succeeded in having it opened for homesteading.

By this time the big cattle outfits had disappeared and smaller independent ranchers had settled along the creeks and rivers. While utilizing the benches and badlands for summer grazing, they harvested prairie hay, raised feed crops, and developed small irrigation projects. Their irrigation systems followed the plans of the beaver, and early

spring floods guaranteed them winter feed. The prairie was still unfenced and neighboring ranchers lived 10 to 30 miles apart.

But overnight this era passed and the country became a frontier for farmers. The sleepy little cow towns awoke to hectic activity. Bewildered citizens struggled to meet the needs of the newcomers. The single dusty street lined with false-fronted general stores, saloons, and livery barns grew to a dozen streets. Little hotels, crowded beyond capacity, laid cots end to end in the corridors. New restaurants, stores, and homes sprang up overnight with the sounds of hammer and saw, the creak of loaded wagons. The prairies were hub-deep in dust stirred by wagonloads of supplies being hauled from town by the "dry-landers." The prairies were checkerboarded with plowed fields and the coyotes retired to distant hilltops to shrill their uneasiness.

Those first few years after the virgin prairie had been plowed, rains came in abundance and at the right time. The good rich soil, undisturbed in the centuries of its mellowing, yielded amazingly. The "dry-landers" harvested bumper crops; machinery dealers and shopkeepers reaped profits, and more and more land seekers came west to seek their fortunes. No one paid any attention to the warnings of old timers that dry years would come.

Then, to the confusion of the newcomers, the rains stopped. Hot winds seared the new grain and year after year the land did not return the seed.

The fact that thousands of acres of northern Montana soil was submarginal for continued cultivation was ignored. The fact that over a period of 70 years, as established by weather records, more dry years than wet years had occurred, was not taken into consideration until thousands of dry-land farmers had failed, abandoned their homesteads and left the country or become subsidized by a Government doling out seed loans, feed loans, summer fallow loans and finally, subsistence loans which tended only to perpetuate the vicious circle.

Recommended practices and crops over a 10- or 12-year period included rodent control, large-scale corn production, summer fallow with dust mulch, summer fallow with cloddy mulch, big team hitches, tractor farming, growing of certified seed, alfalfa planted in rows, potatoes, dairying and poultry raising, and many more. Looking back over this period of confusion and frustration it is easy to see that any number of "little facts," all perhaps valuable in themselves and under proper conditions, were useless as cure-alls. For instance, the growing of dry-land corn--commendable, certainly--was recommended as a solution of the feed-crop failure problem. The only flaw was that often the spring months were so dry that crops did not come up at all and even the gophers were hungry.

The complete and final collapse of the dry-farm era saw the once luxuriantly grassed and plentifully watered country in a state approximating that of a desert. Topsoil blown from barren, plowed fields drifted over fences and buildings. Fences piled high with tumbleweeds collapsed and blew across neglected roads. Ranchers, driven into bankruptcy

because their range land had been homesteaded, were unable to keep up their irrigation systems, lost their stock and left the country. The accumulated livestock of the remaining ranchers and farmers, turned out to rustle on abandoned land and public domain, had overgrazed the pasture in the vicinity of range water. Acres of good grass could not be utilized because drought had sapped the natural springs and water holes.

In 1933, the third year of an exceptionally dry period, and a year after the National Red Cross had declared that an emergency existed in northern Montana, T. C. Spaulding, director of relief for Montana, notified the Malta Commercial Club that M. L. Wilson, then Chief of the Subsistence Homesteads Division of the Federal Relief Administration, was interested in conducting an experiment into the possibilities of establishing dry-land farmers on irrigated land within the area. The original plan was to buy and develop irrigable lands for immediate cropping and settle them with dry-land farmers in need of Federal relief.

Out of that move and through the land-use adjustment work already initiated by the Montana Extension Service have grown the Milk River projects and the task, assumed by the Soil Conservation Service and the Farm Security Administration, of changing the agricultural pattern of an area of 7,000,000 acres.

Success of the combined jobs means the return of these millions of acres of submarginal prairie to a planned stock-raising industry and the restriction of farming to the irrigated Milk River Valley, which meanders through the center of the project, or to smaller irrigable tributaries yet to be developed and to a few scattered communities where soil and proper tillage methods are favorable for some types of large-scale, machanized, grain farming.

The basic fact, upon which both projects are predicated, is that the resources of the three counties are ample for their population. There is land to spare for livestock raising, and the removal of families from these submarginal areas to other States or counties is unnecessary because they and many others can be resettled on irrigable lands in the project area and in the very county in which they have lived.

In the Milk River Valley, the farming population should be concentrated along the creeks and in areas where storage reservoirs may provide irrigation water to be used on the better soil types. Sixty thousand acres of irrigable, undeveloped lands in the area are available for the resettlement of from 500 to 600 families. Good homes, modern conveniences, school facilities, roads and opportunities for social growth can be provided. On these developed farm units, sugar beets, corn and potatoes, can be grown for cash crops with alfalfa, small grains and feed crops for wintering range livestock. Supplemented by dairy cattle, garden produce and poultry, these farms will provide good livings for farmers who have gambled and lost for years on the dry land.

The removal of farmers from the submarginal range areas will permit reestablishment of the livestock industry. Sound management of spring,

summer, and fall grazing on the uplands, and production of winter feed in the irrigated valleys, should be continued as practices that were successfully followed in the 1890-1910 period. Livestock ranches originally established on such a basis but forced out of business when they lost their ranges are again starting operations with the assurance of summer range, and they are developing the lands to produce more and better winter feed.

The Soil Conservation Service has gone a long way toward readjustment of the population to resources through purchase and retirement of lands unsuitable for cultivation and development of such lands principally for grazing use by farmers and ranchers remaining in the area. During the period extending from the establishment of the submarginal land-use adjustment program to July 1, 1939, submarginal land to the amount of 970,198 acres has been purchased at a total cost of $2,581,800.

The rebuilding of this land has been the means by which many of the families have subsisted during the interim. Scattered over this purchase area 339 stock water reservoirs have been constructed; 59,704 acres have been reseeded to grass, and 35 springs and wells have been cleaned out and improved; 658 farmsteads have been obliterated; 482,000 acres have been covered in a rodent eradication campaign; and cattle guards, highways, terracing and tree planting projects have been completed.

In the project area, 11 cooperative grazing associations have been organized. They operate under the Montana grass conservation law and the Taylor Grazing Act. Public-domain lands and Soil Conservation Service lands are administered by the grazing associations in cooperation with the Division of Grazing. State, county, corporate, and privately owned lands are leased by the associations for the use of their members. Ranchers and farmers remaining in the area are allotted summer range on the basis of commensurate property and prior use and dependency. Farmers located on developed irrigable lands in the Milk River Valley use community grazing pastures blocked out with Soil Conservation Service purchased or other leased lands near their irrigated farms.

The Soil Conservation Service has not devoted itself entirely to the rebuilding of the range but has cooperated with the United States Biological Survey in the conservation of wildlife. Food and cover have been planted in the shallow portions of stock water reservoirs as encouragement to nesting wildfowl. Bass, crappies, perch, sunfish, and catfish have been planted in the larger reservoirs.

Upon the theory that "man cannot live by bread alone," the Soil Conservation Service has developed three recreation centers for the people who live in this once desolate land. From small picnic grounds with a few tables and outdoor fireplaces to a more completely developed recreation site centered around a flowing hot-water well in Phillips County, the area's needs from the standpoint of recreation have been provided. It is estimated that 45,000 people visited these centers the past year.

Of the original 901 families in the submarginal purchase area, 403

have moved by personal choice to other parts of the State or to other States. Other families have adjusted themselves to industries other than agriculture in the towns within the area, and approximately 40 families have been able to purchase farms in the irrigable Milk River Valley with their own resources. With the limited funds provided for the purchase land and its development, and the construction of homes and farm buildings, 156 of these displaced families have been resettled in the Milk River Valley by the Farm Security Administration.

A recent survey conducted by the Farm Security Administration indicates that 79 families, all of whom sold submarginal land to the government, must still remove from the dry-land area. Forty-four families will be able to locate themselves, nine are problem cases for other agencies to handle, and 26 families should be resettled by the Farm Security Administration.

The program of the Farm Security Administration has complemented that of the Soil Conservation Service by developing lands suitable for cultivation and extending financial assistance and guidance to families living on lands purchased and who are interested in the farm units developed by that Administration. The lands used for this purpose were almost entirely undeveloped before acquisition by the Farm Security Administration. Development consisted of leveling fields, construction of ditches and drains and other irrigation structures, building of roads, houses, and other farm buildings. The first land was put into production in 1936 when 814.5 acres were farmed. It is estimated that by the spring of 1940, 11,757 acres will be in production.

There are two classes of resettlement clients, those who lease or purchase farm units and those who lease labor units. The farmer client has a unit of from 80 to 160 acres. He raises sugar beets, potatoes, small grains and feed crops, supplementing his farm income with dairy stock, a farm flock of sheep or poultry products. His surplus feed may be utilized by the purchase of feeder lambs or steers in the fall. In some cases he owns range stock. He buys his feeder stock from ranchers in the area and in this way aids in balancing the production picture in northern Montana. He is doing much the same thing as the older generation of stockmen did. He is using irrigable lands to produce feeds to finish the stock raised in the submarginal range areas. But he is doing more for he is getting his living, his few luxuries and a cash income in addition from his irrigated farm. His children are attending good schools. His wife has modern conveniences in her home and the family is interested in building the social structure of the community.

Then there is the second class of client. This class consists of former farmers from submarginal areas who have secured part-time employment, working either for farmers in the community or doing other types of labor. There are 31 family units of this type in the project. These are located adjacent to a town or village. The units vary in size from 1 to 5 acres and provide a garden spot, a feed plot for a cow or pigs, a good house, barn, and poultry house. Here the part-time worker can house his family and make the greater part of the family living from the

land. The family is close to good schools and the land has been developed for efficient irrigation and maximum production. A small rental includes house and land. Future farm clients are usually selected from the more aggressive operators of these family labor units.

As an indication of the progress made by farmer clients, it is interesting to note that approximately 5,000 head of sheep and dairy cattle have been purchased in the past year. Farm flocks averaging about 100 head of ewes and the addition of from one to four dairy cows to the farm herd have been made by 95 clients.

Security for old age and for children, happiness in the building of a home and the satisfaction of bringing crops to a harvest should be the rewards of the farmer in any land. It is a big task--this readjustment of population to land resources. But when it is completed every soil type and every farm should be adjusted to its best use, and every community and every family guided toward providing for themselves the best security the resources of the area can furnish for social and economic well-being.

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